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ABSTRACT

Evaluation Voices is an approach to evaluation that assumes that programs with similar goals can strengthen their evaluation strategies through cluster networking as they build evaluation expertise from within. Evaluators focus on a process that: (1) begins with program staff and stakeholders sharing their vision for the program; (2) recognizes the current level of evaluation skill present within programs; (3) identifies barriers to strengthening the evaluation; (4) provides training to overcome identified barriers; and (5) generates an action plan to strengthen individual program evaluation plans. The Evaluation Voices approach is extremely sensitive to diversity in practice and culture. Results of preliminary uses of the approach have been very encouraging, and programs appear to have strengthened the ability to conduct and use evaluation. Two Figures are included. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Evaluation Voices: Promoting Cluster Evaluation from within Programs

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ABSTRACT

Evaluation Voices:
Promoting Cluster Evaluation from within Programs

Rita G. O'Sullivan & John M. O'Sullivan

Evaluation Voices assumes that programs with similar goals can strengthen their evaluation strategies through cluster networking and must build evaluation expertise from within. To accomplish this, evaluators focus on a process that a) begins with program staff and stakeholders sharing their vision for the program, b) recognizes the current level of evaluation skill present within programs, c) identifies barriers to strengthening evaluation, d) provides training to overcome the identified barriers to evaluation, and e) generates an action plan to strengthen individual program evaluation plans. The two authors are currently involved in using Evaluation Voices in the areas of teaching to diversity and sustainable agriculture.

The Evaluation Voices approach is extremely sensitive to diversity in practice and culture. Because evaluators encourage program staff and stakeholders to begin from their unique perspectives and situations, the approach necessarily provides an innovative way to consider diverse perspectives. The authors are using the approach with diverse groups in the areas of education and agricultural extension. The results of these preliminary activities have been very encouraging in that programs appear to have strengthened the ability to conduct and consume evaluation.

Evaluation Voices:
Promoting Cluster Evaluation from within Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Program evaluation is often problematic for program staff. When programs lack the resources necessary to hire an internal or an external evaluator, the program or project administrator usually assumes the responsibility, even though they may not have the time or the expertise to conduct the evaluation. Even when an external evaluator is available, there is no guarantee that the evaluation will be responsive to the program's needs or leave the program better able to evaluate in the future.

Cluster evaluation was introduced by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in an effort to strengthen the evaluation expertise among similar programs to better meet the agency's need for program evaluation information. Kellogg has defined the cluster evaluation components but has not prescribed the cluster evaluation process. Community Voices is a leadership development program process aimed at fostering community problem solving among limited resource communities. Evaluation Voices combines these two approaches enabling program personnel to strengthen their ability to critically evaluate program effects.

Cluster Evaluation

According to the Kellogg Foundation (1991) "The purposes of cluster evaluation are: 1. to strengthen projects through networking

and technical assistance in evaluation, and 2. to strengthen Foundation programs and policy making through collection of information about the context, implementation, and outcomes of the cluster" (p. 1). Projects with similar types of programs are brought together periodically to participate in networking conferences. During these networking conferences they share current evaluation strategies and discuss as a group common evaluation aims and concerns.

The Kellogg Foundation (1991) has identified four key characteristics of the cluster approach:

1. It looks across a group of projects to identify common threads and themes that, having cross-confirmation, take on greater significance;

2. It seeks not only to learn **What happened** with respect to a group of projects but **Why** those things happened by uncovering factors that contribute to or constrain success within the environment of the projects and the strategies employed;

3. It happens in a collaborative way that allows all players – projects, foundation, and external evaluators to contribute to and participate in the process so that what is learned is of value to everyone; and

4. The relationship between the projects and the external evaluators conducting the cluster evaluation is confidential. Information is reported back to the Foundation in aggregate. This ensures an environment in which projects can be comfortable in sharing with the cluster evaluators the realities of the work they have undertaken – problems and frustrations as well as triumphs. It greatly increases the usefulness of evaluation findings. (pp. 2-3)

Individual projects have staff responsible for evaluation. The Kellogg Foundation employs evaluators to assist them with foundation programming and Board policy making decisions. Cluster evaluators, hired by the Foundation, are in the middle, working with projects to identify and answer important evaluation questions and providing technical assistance to projects aimed at strengthening their evaluation expertise.

Evaluators using cluster evaluation for the Kellogg foundation reported initial success with the approach (Barley, 1991; Henry, 1992; Jenness and Barley, 1992; Seefeldt, 1992). Further work with cluster evaluations has generated positive reports about using "working hypotheses" (Mansberger, 1993) and the usefulness of evaluation networking conferences (Pearl & Rubino, 1993)

To date cluster evaluation has almost exclusively been used by programs funded by the Kellogg Foundation. How cluster evaluation might function outside a central funding agency context is unclear. Barley and Jenness (1993) suggested that the cluster approach could be used as a way to strengthen evaluation in smaller programs with similar purposes. Further, as with any model, putting theory into practice can be problematic. Conducting cluster evaluations is very much influenced by the evaluation stances of the individual cluster evaluators. Use of cluster evaluation for the Kellogg Foundation's Rural America Cluster appeared to be more prescriptive than collaborative (Kellogg, 1992). With Evaluation Voices, the authors have taken the cluster evaluation approach, added a Community Voices implementation framework, and begun to assist programs of similar purpose evaluate their efforts.

Community Voices

Community Voices is a leadership development program developed at North Carolina A&T State University with funding provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The project was initiated in 1988. Since that time it has been field tested and implemented in 4 southern states- North Carolina, Alabama, Arkansas, and Texas as a multistate effort of 1890 land-grant universities. The field test process in North Carolina alone involved 1500 leaders from 35 communities across the state from the northeast corner of the state to the western mountains.

The Community Voices model (1993) builds on the standard community development literature and fits as a consensus model (Christenson 1980). It very much follows the adult education model proposed by Horton and Freire (1990) and the Extension model used in North Carolina for many years. Community Voices proposed a core curriculum of leadership development and then molded that curriculum through the field-test process into a collaborative, consensus model of leading toward community action.

During the 15 sessions of the program, those invited participate in a transformational process. An invited group of emerging community leaders come together to share their individual visions and to work toward a shared group vision for community improvement. They are guided by Community Voices facilitators to identify their problem-solving skills and consolidate their group skills to work together toward achieving their common vision. In one community this process resulted in the opening of a community

center. In another participating community, the Community Voices process assisted in improving health care resources.

The program has shown positive results in sites ranging from very isolated, small, rural communities to inner-city public housing projects. In all cases, people volunteered for the program and donated their time over a three-month period to participate in training and to actively involve themselves in direct community service. Their energy, ability, and commitment to the program has been astounding.

THE APPROACH

Evaluation Voices assumes that programs with similar goals can strengthen their evaluation strategies through cluster networking and must build evaluation expertise from within. To accomplish this, evaluators focus on a process tha: a) begins with program staff and stakeholders sharing their vision for the program, b) recognizes the current level of evaluation skill present within programs, c) identifies barriers to strengthening evaluation, d) provides training to overcome the identified barriers to evaluation, and e) generates an action plan to determine next steps in the evaluation process. The two authors are currently involved in using Evaluation Voices in the areas of teaching to diversity and sustainable agriculture.

Conceptually, Evaluation Voices assumes that effective evaluation is an on-going activity that spirals through a consistent process of: a) perceiving a vision for the program, b) forming evaluation questions relevant to that vision, c) designing and

implementing an information system to help answer those question, and d) then summarizing the information collected so that the vision for the program may be revisited; these are the components of a working evaluation plan process. Figure 1 depicts the circularity of the Evaluation Voices action planning process. Evaluation Voices participants are asked to complete an evaluation plan during the network meeting.

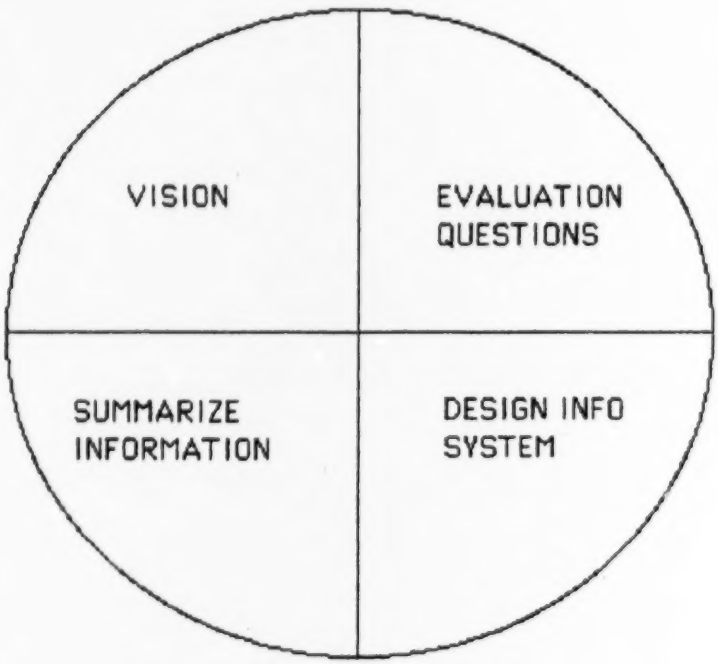

Figure 1. Evaluation Voices Action Planning Process

Vision

Groups of people, representing similar programs, are brought together to focus on how they might more effectively evaluate the effects of the programs in which they are participating. The first step in this process is having each participant communicate their

vision for the program. This focuses on what the program is trying to accomplish within a given time frame. When more than one person from a program is present, this vision can be expressed as a group depiction (using pictures, words, icons, etc.) to demonstrate what stakeholders hope the program might accomplish. These visions are then shared and in the sharing members of the group clarify their own program expectations. Their Vision for the Program is then listed as part of the evaluation plan.

Evaluation Questions

Working from their vision, program participants are then guided through a process that helps them to generate meaningful (and answerable) evaluation questions. At this stage, grandiose aspirations of long-term, positive change need to be honed to more achievable interim accomplishments. General statements of good works need to be tied down to observable phenomena or translated into measurable indicators. Requiring participants to turn their visions into questions for group presentation facilitates this process. Questions are then subject to group critique and probing. Evaluation question are scrutinized by the entire group and positive modification result to the evaluation plan.

Information Gathering

Information gathering follows a two-step process. First the programs are asked to assess their current level of evaluation effort. What evaluation skills are present and what evaluation mechanisms are currently in place. Next, program staff look at their evaluation questions in contrast to what already is in place and identify gaps for additional data gathering.

Current Skills

During this step program staff assess the current skill level of the people within a program to determine if the program is approaching the collective vision by answering the identified evaluation questions. What measures are already in place to evaluate the program? What evaluation mechanisms have program staff implemented to inform them about how well the program is proceeding? Programs can be asked ahead of time to bring evaluation materials to share. This exchange of information strengthens each program's knowledge of possible evaluation strategies and also allows for questioning of current practice.

Information Gathering

At this juncture, program staff list current evaluation practices and look at them in light of the important evaluation questions they have framed. Their next task it to identify additional information needs to strengthen the existing information gathering system. In specifying the total information system necessary to the evaluation, program staff often find the task to be more than they can accomplish. Setting realistic data collection expectations, based on program priorities, is essential. An evaluation needs assessment might be appropriate. All information gathering strategies are listed in the evaluation plan

Summarizing Information

The final step in the Evaluation Voices action planning process is to determine how the information gathered will be summarized. Program staff need to identify the audience(s) for the evaluation and think about the format(s) to be used for evaluation reporting. During

this step overzealous program staff may come to realize that some of the information they thought to collect has no audience; others with less enthusiasm might discover they have omitted an important set of evaluation questions or information sources.

Identifying Barriers to Evaluation

Once program staff complete their evaluation plans, then they must identify barriers to implementation. Barrier are usually common across programs and most often are related to insufficient time, sparse resources, or limited expertise. In the process of identifying and sharing barriers, participants are apt to share how they have managed to overcome barriers that another program still faces. The network also can work together to circumvent commonly perceived barriers.

Additional Evaluation Training

Once program staff identify barriers to evaluation, they will likely recognize the need for additional evaluation training. Through the Evaluation Voices process, they have recognized their evaluation needs, specified them, developed an evaluation plan, and identified barriers to successfully implementing the evaluation. The next logical step is to identify what additional information or training they need to proceed with and/or improve the evaluation.

Determining Next Steps

The final step in the Evaluation Voices process is to develop an action plan for the future. Based on the evaluation plan, perceived barriers, and additional training needs, program staff must determine the next sequence of events. The action plan might specify that program staff begin by returning to their programs to

share what they have done, followed by a critical examination of their current evaluation activities. Some program staff might be in a *position to use the Evaluation Voices process with those staff* members who did not attend the network gathering.

DISCUSSION

Applications in the Field

Evaluation Voices and Learning Styles School-Based Programs

Evaluation Voices has been used with educators who are trying to implement learning styles instruction in primary through secondary schools. As part of an intermediate training workshop, the authors conducted an Evaluation Voices session with a group of educators from eight different school sites. Workshop participants received an overview of the Evaluation Voices approach and then spent the next three hours working through the process while specifying their evaluation plan

Workshop participants were given a worksheet similar to the one shown in Figure 2. As the were guided through the Evaluation Voices process they filled in their sheet accordingly. They were able to leave the session with a draft evaluation plan to share with their colleagues. Plans are underway to continue implementation of the Evaluation Voices experience with educators based on this positive exercise.

EVALUATION VOICES

Vision for the Program	Evaluation Questions
Information Gathering Strategies	Summarizing Information Needs

Figure 2. Evaluation Voices Evaluation Plan Worksheet

Evaluation Voices and Sustainable Agriculture Programs

As part of a new sustainable agriculture project consortium, funded by the Kellogg Foundation, Evaluation Voices will be used to strengthen the evaluation expertise of four on-site community projects working with seven consortium member organizations.

Many of the consortium members have no formal evaluation training and yet will be responsible for participating in evaluating the effects of the sustainable agriculture initiatives in the on-site communities. Because it is a Kellogg Foundation funded project, cluster evaluation networking conferences will be used to network this project with the other the 15 sustainable agriculture projects funded nationally. It is expected that the Evaluation Voices process will prepare project personnel to gain maximum benefit from the cluster evaluation meetings andto build a chain of evaluation to include the grass roots level.

Advantages of an Evaluation Voices Approach

The Evaluation Voices approach is extremely sensitive to diversity in practice and culture. Because evaluators encourage program staff and stakeholders to begin from their unique perspectives and situations, the approach necessarily provides an innovative way to consider diverse perspectives. The authors are using the approach with diverse groups in the areas of education and agricultural extension. The results of these preliminary activities have been very encouraging in that programs appear to have strengthened the ability to conduct and consume evaluation at a variety of stakeholder levels.

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